

“KOLOSALNO! THERE IS SOMETHING HERE...POWER, ENERGY, THE FUTURE!”:  
HAUNTING, STEEL, PROGRESS, AND THE URBAN RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE

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by

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

“KOLOSALNO! THERE IS SOMETHING HERE...POWER, ENERGY, THE FUTURE!”:  
HAUNTING, STEEL, PROGRESS, AND THE URBAN RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE

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and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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## Introduction

All I do is cough and choke in Pittsburgh  
All I do is cough and choke in Pittsburgh  
All I do is cough and choke  
From the iron filings and the sulphur smoke  
In Pittsburgh, Lord God, Pittsburgh

-Woody Guthrie

It was at the forks of the Ohio that Maxo Vanka first made his mark in the United States. Vanka, a Croatian immigrant and artist, made his way into America in the mid-1930s and immediately was drawn into the working class fold. While traveling with his friend, the novelist Louis Adamic, Vanka began to conceptualize his version of his new home. A small Catholic Croatian parish outside of Pittsburgh quickly recruited Vanka to paint murals on the Church's bare walls. At St. Nicolas in the Millvale neighborhood, Vanka imagined and crafted images of America and globalized industry, not as a straight line of progress, but as flashes of unforgettable pictures. Vanka too was wrapped inside this cultural production. Sensitive to the woes of steel working citizens, he sought some sense of social justice within his painting. Thirteen murals painted in Pittsburgh over the course of several weeks in 1937, and eleven completed four years later in 1941, explore the various experiences presented in immigrant labor and industrial capital. The images are set within the transnational migration of Croatian people inhabiting a new world of highly charged global concerns.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Pittsburgh was a city defined by its industry. Coal, steel, glass, and immigrants flowed up and down the Allegheny, Monongahela, and Ohio Rivers as the area rapidly urbanized. Between 1880 and 1940, the population of the city nearly tripled from close to two hundred thousand to over six

hundred fifty thousand people. During this time, immigrants constituted nearly a third of the population, pouring in from Eastern and Southern Europe seeking jobs and a new chances on life.<sup>1</sup> These imagined chances however, were tempered by an often extremely conflicted present. The daily reality was made up of long hours, small pay, smog, and dense living conditions. While urban reformers and religious leaders labored among the working class immigrants, this beleaguered population was largely left to their own devices, struggling to carve out a way of life. Due to this steady flow of people coming into Pittsburgh, the city's working class became an ethnic mosaic.<sup>2</sup>

One night, while deep in the work of creating murals for the small parish outside one of America's largest industrial centers, Vanka began to feel that a ghost haunted him. Worn out from near twenty-hour days of work, he forged ahead, creating image after image of what would become his first, and last, murals. Instead of the classical Byzantine-inspired pieces he was familiar with from his native Croatian churches, Vanka, drawing his influence from the streets, painted a mix of social commentaries and melded a religious ethos from the working class, and for working families. Father Zagar, head of the parish, hoped to calm Vanka's nervous condition by helping him mix paints and stand guard while the murals were painted the haunting persisted. Each evening shortly after midnight, the dogs outside would start barking and the scaffolding would creak as if a train was passing on the nearby railway. Each evening Vanka would quit painting and attempt to run from the building when he saw a man sitting in the fourth pew of the church. Zagar, skeptical, had seen nothing. At the point of placating Vanka, he spent the next two weeks attempting to dispel the ghost through prayer and reaching out

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<sup>1</sup> Nora Faires, "Immigrants and Industry: Peopling the Iron City," in *City at the Point: Essays on the Social History of Pittsburgh*, edited by Samuel P. Hays, 10. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 15.

communicate; however, one evening he told Vanka that he too had heard something peculiar. Zagar noted, “A few minutes after Vanka had turned out the light over his bed, there were three clear and distinct clicks or knocks in the closest proximity of his bed. The knocks were not as if some one struck a piece of wood or metal or a wall, but something different and strange... They touched my heart, and everything in me with a long chill... I knew there was a dead man in my room.”<sup>3</sup>

This thesis will explore the various intersections through which Vanka engaged the Croatian lived experience within his murals. Vanka was only in Pittsburgh for a total of several months over the course of his two painting sessions, but from these murals emerged conflicted images of labor, war, and religion. By looking at the relationship between Vanka’s artwork in St. Nicholas Church, folk traditions, and the spaces in which steel was produced, it is possible to see how the different meanings of the murals took place and held significance within the community. The specters that haunted Vanka as he worked to complete his 1937 paintings surface from the tensions between these opposed mural images. Modernity, to Vanka, was everywhere, but not accessible to everyone, a fact that he bore out in his pictures. Situating the indicators of Vanka’s ghostly experience within the steel working world of Pittsburgh registers the ambiguous relationship that exists between Vanka and his “strange experience.”<sup>4</sup> The social commentary surrounding the images chosen for Vanka’s murals and the specter that followed him reflect the complex process of identity formation in the Steel City.

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<sup>3</sup> Louis Adamic, *My America*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1938. 177.

<sup>4</sup> Here I am using Diane Goldstein’s useful language of haunting. She argues that, “The terminology of the “weird” like that of the “paranormal” is misleading. These labels suggest something that is beyond our “normal” experience; marginal to our everyday lives as modern Americans.” In *Haunting Experiences: Ghosts in Contemporary Folklore* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2007), x.



I have structured this paper into three main parts. Following the introduction, the first section examines Vanka's entrance into America, and the spaces of steel. I draw upon the work of folklorists and spatial theorists to examine the several key themes in the thesis, highlighting the crossing and dwelling process Vanka engages in his murals. As anthropologist Kathleen Stewart urges about, I try to "Imagine the kind of place where, when something happens, people make sense of it not by constructing an explanation of what happened but by offering accounts of its impacts, traces, signs."<sup>5</sup> In short, between a process of crossing and mapping, in reconfiguring social processes, Vanka refined and tapped into an energy of the city that had long existed, and, at various levels of religiously significant murals, made sense to the immigrant community. Playing on the problematic interdependence of labor and faith, if two distinct categories can ever be defined apart from one another, Vanka explored the intense issue of map making, not just alongside the rivers, but tied to the Croatian's past, present, and future.<sup>6</sup> Accounting for the haunting of Vanka then accounts for a specter of modernity haunting industrial Pittsburgh.

The second part of this thesis will examine the folk song tradition of steel workers. After brief overview of the historical significance of several popular songs from folklorist George Korson's 1947 volume *Pennsylvania Songs*, I compare local Pittsburgh songs to the national message of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger. Interwoven into this

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<sup>5</sup> Stewart, *A Place*, 57. While Stewart's work is concerned with West Virginia Coal Camps, a similar language is helpful in conceiving the spaces of Pittsburgh where culture was dominated by spaces, in both cases different excesses of labor.

<sup>6</sup> This idea of map making or engaging the ideas of modernity that Vanka's murals are concerned with is taken from the work of Kent Ryden who argues that stories and folklore take shape on invisible maps that give, "The experiential meanings we ascribe to places are much fuller, more complex, and more vivid than the ones we pick up secondhand. Each element of a cognitive map has a memory attached; each is an allusive shorthand notion for part of a life story." In *Mapping the Invisible Landscape* (Iowa City, University of Iowa Press; 1993), 55.

process is the folktale of Joe Magarac, and the competing images of his story.

Encountering this recorded information highlights the tensions and ambiguities between steel and the effects it had on immigrant community expressions. As steel workers forged a meaning within new communal commitments, new narratives of self emerged as a positive representation of the working class.

The third part is concerned with placing the haunting of Vanka within the explored framework of steel production and industrial capitalism in Pittsburgh. I follow Avery Gordon, who argues that, “the concentration on haunting and ghosts is a way of maintaining the salience of social analysis.” Therefore, I see the ghost of St. Nicholas operating as more than just a metaphorical marker of steel.<sup>7</sup> While the murals themselves operate with temporal changes and express religious concerns of labor, the ghost embedded Vanka’s personal experience of the immigrant American experience within a religious context.

In the conclusion, I connect the ways in which Vanka’s murals at St. Nicholas inform and depict a world touched by steel to the various creative functions of steel folklore tradition. Nuancing the connection between church artwork and laborlore allows for a new examination into the lives lived by steel workers within the daily smog and toil that made up the spaces of the Pittsburgh. Despite the uncertain relationship between Vanka, the ghost, folklore, and steel, each competing space contributes to the construction of a shared Pittsburgh steel memorialization process. Through the murals, religious expression touched upon the relationship of power and meaning within this industrial setting and offered a critique of America in material terms.

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<sup>7</sup> Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 8.

The evolution of social relations within immigrant communities in Pittsburgh reflects broad changes in a transformative period of urbanization across the American landscape. Rapidly modernizing, the American social order was assuming some recognizable forms, but was still subject to the uncertainty of industries in flux, and the rise of powers across the oceans. Religious practices, surviving from the move from southern and eastern Europe, were moved into urban areas and gave a sense of familiar settings from which the unfamiliar industrial complex could be seen in a common lexicon.

The City of Steel

Well what did Jones and Laughlan steal? Pittsburgh  
What did Jones and Laughlan steal? Pittsburgh  
What did Jones and Laughlan steal?  
Up an' down the river jus' as far as you can see  
In Pittsburgh, Lord God, Pittsburgh

- Woody Guthrie

Maxo Vanka was born in 1889, the illegitimate son of parents who came from two prominent noble families in the Hapsburg Empire. Rumored scandals marked a youth in which Vanka was raised by a poor peasant woman before eventually being found by his paternal grandfather and placed back his family.<sup>8</sup> After several years in the art school of Zagreb, Vanka married an American Jewish woman, Margaret Stetten, and resigned his position of instructor to move to New York City. Travel would mark the next several years of Vanka's life as he struggled as a new artist in a new homeland during the Great Depression. Upon receiving an invitation from Father Zagar to paint the barren walls of St. Nicholas Catholic Church in Pittsburgh, however, Vanka was able to express his lived experience and his views of American life.

"Ovo ye kolosalno," Vanka exclaimed. "This is colossal!" As he made his way off the boat and into the hustle of 1934 New York City, Vanka was taken back by the incalculability of what was to become his new home. "There is something here! ...Power, energy, the future....Kolosalno," marveling at the massiveness of human construction, Vanka was astounded by the innovation of labor within this new, expanding, and decidedly urban, environment. From this vantage point, the Croatian artist, Margaret, and two year old daughter, Peggy, entered the fray of America. As his close friend, writer

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<sup>8</sup> Edward Brett, "A Monument to Catholic Social Justice: The Maxo Vanka Murals of St. Nicholas Croatian Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania" *American Catholic Studies* Vol 122, No. 1 2011, 101.

Louis Adamic, recounted, Vanka's early impressions of his new homeland appeared quite astounding. He was fascinated by details of modern products, and immediately took an interest in seeing how Americans lived their lives. With Adamic as his tour guide, Vanka was free to move about the streets.<sup>9</sup>

For eight to ten hours a day Vanka would go "tramping on hard pavement" before heading home to his family. While Margaret was concerned with getting Vanka's artwork into galleries and arranged shows for him, Maxo continued to visit people on the roads. Adamic recalled that Vanka spent his time arranging a studio, but mostly "bummed around."<sup>10</sup> Feeling an attachment to working class people, Vanka drew and painted pictures, mostly of "bums, white and Negro workers, prostitutes who stopped him in the street, or with whom he otherwise became acquainted."<sup>11</sup> Adamic, himself a self-proclaimed socialist, comes across in his story as somewhat amused and interested that Vanka had taken to the poor in such a manner. "He came up with vivid word-pictures," Adamic recalled, "accompanied by pencil drawings of the unemployed living in fantastic 'Hoovervilles' of Bowery degenerates and unfortunates, of prostitutes on the lowest rung of their profession, of drunkards imbibing shoe polish and 'canned heat,' and of other characters from the substrate of American society."<sup>12</sup> Each example that Adamic gave highlighted Vanka's near obsession with the poor and outcast.

This story of Vanka's early arrival to the United States in the mid-1930s introduces the complex nature of religious practice, memory, and imagination in a northern industrial American city. Vanka proposed one account of this distinct urban

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<sup>9</sup> Adamic, *My America*, 162.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

religion. Yet his creation was not alone among the changing patterns of life that occurred as a result of the dramatic social rifts created by the imposing stature of steel in organizing all facets of life. To attend to the allegories of steel and labor in industrial Pittsburgh, is to begin to uncover the power and scope of what may be called a religion born of and from a secular modernity.<sup>13</sup> In dramatizing the extent to which industry and technology had shaped and continued to shape human agency, Vanka explored in grave and exacting depictions the details of the history of material conditions that were allowing the world, in all its glowing advances, to falter in accounting for the cruel and savage underbelly of society.

Further, the murals of Vanka in St. Nicholas Catholic Church enact a discussion of the global affairs of identity and citizenship. Within the industrial complex of 1930s Pittsburgh, the lives of immigrants, industry, and the economy were interwoven.<sup>14</sup> Fostering transatlantic ethnic communities among specific nationalities promoted and encouraged both nostalgia for homelands and adjustment to the nuances of American life. What is fascinating, then, about this Catholic understanding of the self is the combination of an American idea of capitalism tied within the idea of modernity and progress. Unsettling moments of industry and faith intermingled with religious practices of secularism. For the most part however, scholars have paid little attention to the religious expressions that emerged from the creation of steel and the world that Pittsburgh steel workers inhabited. The studies that have tend to focus on the practices of specific

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<sup>13</sup> In saying this, I am informed by Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan Van Antwerpen *Rethinking Secularism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 5. Who argue that, “The discussion about morality in modern public life increasingly challenges accepted notions “religion,” and raises questions of whether religion can be thought of as a “thing” at all – that is, as an entity that can be reliably expected to command social responses and to provide a coherent alternative to secular ideologies and institutions.” Further, in looking at new forms of religion and secularism is the work of John Lardas *Modern Secularism in Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Fairies, 11.

churches, and remain focused almost entirely on institution forms of religion.<sup>15</sup> Within the material culture of Pittsburgh, however, questions remain about the issues of work itself and the ways in which people and communities orientated themselves against and through the urban spaces of the city.

The debates, discourses, politics surrounding the events of Vanka's paintings can be seen as a form of religious allegory, through which the meanings of labor found expression.<sup>16</sup> This is a story about places. In Vanka's work at St. Nicholas the issues that constitute the debates engaged around working class citizens and those holding power, both of capital and of the ownership of steel, are played out in over twenty murals that evoke the contested spaces of industrial capitalism in Pittsburgh. Vanka's multiple religious tropes and dialogues question the future of steel in Depression Era America. In quickly popularized imagery, Vanka touched on a number of different concerns that working class Pittsburghers negotiated daily. These concerns played out on the streets of the city in the form of protests and worker strikes throughout the ninetieth and twentieth century, but in visual form in the space of the church they became a religious critique of the social ills Vanka saw in his first days in America.

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<sup>15</sup> This is part of a larger Pittsburgh legacy in which Pittsburgh's churches were often built and maintained by ethnic groups within ethnic community pockets. Or, as Richard Callahan argues, "Most important in considering the intertwinings of religion and class, in my mind, is to be aware of religion as something *made*, something *produced* and *reworked* by human beings in particular contexts. Religion does not just emerge on its own, nor does it just determine how people will think or act. This means taking the *work* of religion into account, examining both the possibilities and the limitations that particular religious and cultural resources provided and how people worked with them in producing and reproducing selves, worlds, communities, and material conditions." In, "The Work of Class in Southern Religion," *Journal of Southern Religion* 13 (2011): <http://jsr.fsu.edu/issues/vol13/callahan.html>

<sup>16</sup> By religious allegory I am using the idea advanced by Richard J. Callahan, Kathryn Lofton, and Chad E. Seales whose work on the relationship between commodity and religion uses the idea of industry religion that they argue is, "a discourse that attributes suprahuman power to raw materials and the mechanical technologies employed to covert those materials into consumer goods." In "Allegories of Progress: Industrial Religion in the United States" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78/1 (2010), 3.

In a valiant effort, Vanka completed the mural work that would normally take several months in just under eight weeks. Adamic, who was living in New York and had been exchanging letters with Vanka, traveled with Margaret, upon completion of the murals, to the church. When they arrived at the church, which was insignificant by outside appearances, the travelers stepped inside:

Over the main altar was a five-times-life-size Madonna with the Child, both in costumes decorated with Croatian peasant designs; and beneath the Madonna, on either side of the main altar, two pictures, each with several life-size figures: one depicting religion among Croatian peasants in the old country; the other, religion among Croatian peasants in the old country; side altars was a picture of the Crucifixion; over the other, Mater Dolorosa. Upon the arched ceiling were the strikingly beautiful figures of John, Mark, Luke, and Matthew; and on the two straight walls beneath the choir, probably the two best pictures of the lot – one showing Croatian mothers in the old country sorrowing for their fallen in wars; the other, Croatian immigrant mothers in America weeping over the body of one of their sons killed in an industrial accident.<sup>17</sup>



**MARY, QUEEN OF CROATIANS**

The large altar painting shows the Mother and Child in traditional Croatian colors and regal trappings. The inscription on the altar arch translates, "Mary, Queen of Croats, Pray For Us."

18

The only painting that Father Zagar required of Vanka was Mary, the mother figure of Croatia.<sup>19</sup> Placed over the altar, the imposing figure was dressed in traditional

<sup>17</sup> Louis Adamic, *My America* 170

<sup>18</sup> Rosensteel, Rene, photographer. "Mary, Queen of Croats" Photograph. From "The Murals of Maxo Vanka" [http://www.vankamurals.org/images/Rosensteel\\_20080305\\_IMG\\_0807b.jpg](http://www.vankamurals.org/images/Rosensteel_20080305_IMG_0807b.jpg) (accessed April 10, 2013).



Croatian clothing and had the course hands of a peasant. This allowed her to occupy the liminal state of the past and present of the church, “making her simultaneously representative of the parish and a symbol of Croatia itself.”<sup>20</sup> Mother figures played a central role in his 1937 works. Against the backdrop of suffering in war and labor, mothers offered a place of resistance and peace. While spatial juxtapositions were a key feature of Vanka’s work, mothers symbolically linked to the Croatian community in Pittsburgh to its European heritage. The spatial features of the church gave Vanka the opportunity to socially critique the world outside of the brick and mortar institution by painting opposite views of society on opposite sides of the building’s walls.

On opposing sides of the altar were transnational images of the immigrant experience, of which Vanka took part. By 1930, many immigrants were well established within Pittsburgh’s economic spheres, but were only beginning their ascendancy into politics and unionizing efforts.<sup>21</sup> Religious symbols play a large role in Vanka’s murals and provide a place from which Vanka critiqued war and social ills. The competing images of “Croatians in Millvale” and “Pastoral Croatia” presented Vanka’s work as a transnational embodiment of the parish.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. Also see Leonard, 28.

<sup>21</sup> McCollester, *The Point*, 294.



#### **CROATIANS IN MILLVALE**

In the contrasting scene, parishioners in industrial workclothes offer St. Nicholas Church to the Holy Mother. The kneeling priest is Father Zagar. The Allegheny Valley forms the background.

22



#### **PASTORAL CROATIA**

Croatian peasants in native dress lift their eyes in the Angelus, the morning prayer.

23

The two images of communities in prayer signaled two different Croatian experiences. One located in a past Europe, and one found in 1900s America. “Croats in Millvale” draws on the creation of national ethnic churches in Pittsburgh while

<sup>22</sup> Rosensteel, Rene, photographer. “Croats in Millvale” Photograph. From “The Murals of Maxo Vanka” [http://www.vankamurals.org/millvale\\_murals/index.html](http://www.vankamurals.org/millvale_murals/index.html) (Accessed April 10, 2013).

<sup>23</sup> Rosensteel, Rene, photographer. “Pastoral Croatia” Photograph. From “The Murals of Maxo Vanka” [http://www.vankamurals.org/images/Rosensteel\\_20080318\\_IMG\\_3377.jpg](http://www.vankamurals.org/images/Rosensteel_20080318_IMG_3377.jpg) (Accessed April 10, 2013).

recognizing the authority and power of religious institutions in the production and shaping of spaces. These two images tied Father Zagar and Croatian immigrants to Polish, Slavic, Italian, and Greek communities in the city by sharing in the formation of a new church. Further, the images also expressed labor within the church depictions of shovels, picks, and lunch pails. The city of steel loomed in the back, far behind the immigrants, smoky and foreboding. “Pastoral Croatia,” however, countered this image. By acting as juxtaposition to the industry of Pittsburgh, this mural represented the spaces of religion in a landscape of the past. Here, Vanka attempted to paint his imagined past of Croatia heavily favoring a family image only possible in rural community, which is placed in the background. Instead of eyes pointing to the ground and being led by a priest as the central figure of authority, the community in Croatia instead acted as a close-knit familial group that was lacking in America.

After the first waves of immigrants settled by the early twentieth century, Pittsburgh’s physical landscape was dotted with national immigrant churches. Nora Faires contends that “In minute and also significant ways, their Pittsburgh churches differed from those immigrants had left in Europe. In bustling Pittsburgh, the familiar peal of church bells no longer beckoned Slovaks to services. Nor were these churches the places where generations of the immigrants’ ancestors had worshiped, been christened, married, or laid to rest. Unlike the situation in Europe, in early twentieth-century Pittsburgh, immigrations mostly likely had participated in founding their church or knew some of the founders.”<sup>24</sup> Vanka’s murals showed this rearrangement within church ownership, and the intimacy with which immigrant communities built their own churches. Ethnic enclaves and fraternal societies flourished alongside church

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<sup>24</sup> Faires, “Immigrants and Industry: Peopling the ‘Iron City,’” 12.

communities. Finns, Czechs, Hungarians, Serbs, Croatians, Poles, and other immigrants established organizations to protect themselves against dire financial situations, illnesses and industrial accident.<sup>25</sup> Social workers had long flocked to Pittsburgh in hopes of assisting these communities, but were unable or unwilling to provide many social services.<sup>26</sup>

Frances Babic states, “At first these images are overwhelming. Politics, economic systems, peasant folklife, immigrants, and caste systems are portrayed in Byzantine style alongside traditional Croatian images of faith, sacrifice, and redemption.” According to Babic’s reading of the murals, the Croatian Mother represents a pillar of strength and spirituality for the community.<sup>27</sup> Further, Vanka’s paintings give a firm indictment against any system which ignores the dignity of the individual. They also reflect the alien forces of capitalism that motive those to unfettered greed and power, and were Vanka’s tribute to the ignored working class person.<sup>28</sup>

The labor pains associated with the new economic order often originated in the ethnic hubs inside and outside of the city.<sup>29</sup> Understanding the politicized space of capital as an object of critical social discourse is imperative in bracketing the multiple futures of modernities forged within steel in twentieth century Pittsburgh. Within the machines of industry, steel was the product that was imagined and was the future. If coal, as Richard Callahan has argued, “powered progress itself” and fired, “the imagination to visions of

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> These efforts resulted in the creation of the *Pittsburgh Survey* which, aside from a wide array of data collection, did little to help and address the lack of social needs in working class communities. This issue has been taken up by historians in depth in Vexler, Robert I. *Pittsburgh: A Chronological & Documentary History, 1682 – 1976*. New York: Oceana Publications, 1977.

<sup>27</sup> Frances Babic, “Vanka’s Gift” in *Maxo Vanka: Millvale Murals at St. Nicholas Croatian Catholic Church* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Filmmakers/Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, 2010), 2.

<sup>28</sup> Babic, 2.

<sup>29</sup> McColleston, *The Point*, 107-210.

human potential and salvations of modern civilization,” than steel was part of this progress.<sup>30</sup> Black dust and work under the ground was combined in the strenuous steel making progress. Steel, like coal was both a substance and a symbol, its power intertwined with a modern spirit and matter that gave way to the multiple meanings of progress through and with material.<sup>31</sup> Steel was fueling and was fueled by other sectors of industry.

To illustrate these themes, Vanka painted parallel tragedies in the Croatian nation. In the old homeland, he depicted World War I as a war fought under the false promise of making European society better. In his new land of America, industrialism represented this same false premise. In both cases, sons and mothers were powerless against the onslaught of money and power. Here, again, Vanka built upon a Slavic folk tradition and mythology that represented the spiritual home of Croatians in their native homeland. Rooting this artwork within shared ideas of identity, Vanka was able to provide an acceptable critique of modernity to a people who did not normally have the voice or standing to do so. Transnationally, these critiques tied the old country to the new world, and rooted the new church at St. Nicholas within the comforts of Croatia that was never fully left behind.

Several years prior to Vanka’s work, economic geographer Langdon White highlighted the obsession with productive spaces and the importance of organizing life around material conditions in a 1928 article published in the journal *Economic Geography*.<sup>32</sup> Tracing the evolution of industry at the forks of the Ohio River, White

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<sup>30</sup> Callahan, Lofton, and Seales “Allegories of Progress”

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Langdon White “The Iron and Steel Industry of the Pittsburgh District” *Economic Geography* Vol 4 No 2 (1928), 115-139.

stated, “The Pittsburgh District is the capital of the world of iron and steel...this district produces annually more than one-fourth of the nation’s steel...no other is so thoroughly identified with every phase of industry.”<sup>33</sup> Pittsburgh, he denotes through several articles and photographs, can only be thought of in the twentieth century in relationship to labor.



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From the years following the Civil War until White published his article, the leading products of Pittsburgh steel were the Carnegie Steel Company, a subsidiary of the United States Steel Corporation; the Jones and Laughlin Steel Corporation, the Crucible Steel Company; and the Pittsburgh Steel Company. Each company played a key role in the organization of the Pittsburgh of the 1930s that Vanka reflected on. Blast furnace owners played a major role in causing the iron and steel industries to move into the Allegheny Valley. Not only the city but also the areas outside were transformed as steel companies

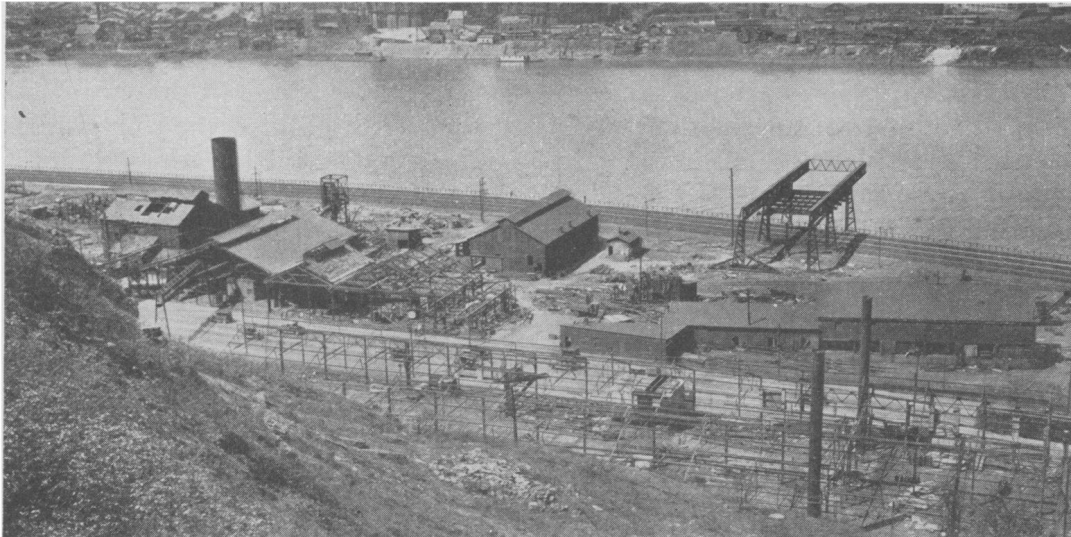
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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> White, writes of this image of the point of Pittsburgh that, “The “Point” where the Allegheny and the Monongahela merge to form the Ohio. The barges of coal anchored here await consignment to the mills along any one of the three rivers. Note the distinct line formed by the dark ore and coal dust-laden water of the Monongahela on the right, and the muddy water of the Allegheny on the left. The business section of the “Steel City” is built on the triangle between the rivers “ in “The Iron and Steel,” 130.

replaced anthracite coal burning furnaces with other more efficient forms of burning.

White concluded from this process of organizing, “So intimately is Pittsburgh related to steel that most people never think of one without immediately thinking of the other; the two terms have become synonymous.”<sup>35</sup> Immigrants coming to the city were ingrained into the material force that was steel.



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Vanka drew inspiration both aesthetically and religiously from this environment to paint his murals at St. Nicholas. Locating steel on the religious landscape requires looking through several lenses simultaneously to engage, in an interdisciplinary way, the multilayered touch of Vanka’s murals, the ghost that haunted Vanka while he painted, and the industrial faith in the progress of steel. Currently, there are no major works written on Vanka’s life, his story only told in Adamic’s lone chapter of *My America*. Existing scholarship provides a useful visual interpretation of Vanka’s artistic work on

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<sup>35</sup> White, “The Iron and Steel,” 115.

<sup>36</sup> White’s commentary also reflects the obsession with progress that marks the unsettling of the city, “FIGURE 15. Conquered by the city. This mill, one of the oldest in the district, has been purchased by the Pittsburgh and Lake Erie Railway whose tracks skirt the river. The railway is dismantling the mill in order to use its site for a produce yard. This narrow strip of flood plain, about 300 feet wide and a half mile long, is located on the south side of the Ohio River not far from the “Point.” Such sites are no longer desirable for mills, since they offer no opportunity for expansion “ “The Iron and Steel,” 133.

labor and religion, but fails to fully engage the social context from which steel affects and is affected. In attempting to locate the various meanings and associations of steel within the Croatian community, therefore, I pull from spatial theorists, folklore traditions, historical records, and religious studies. Situating steel this way allows for cutting across the various intersections that labor and religion engage.<sup>37</sup>

Focusing on the boundaries marked by the work of geographers and Vanka invites a discussion of contested spaces. As Robert Orsi noted, “Intense boundary work has deep roots in American civilization. For social, historical, topographical, religious, and cultural reasons...the industrial city took shape on the ground, it also emerged as a discursive construction in several overlapping idioms, a charged imaginative creation of fantasy, terror, and desire.”<sup>38</sup> Orsi claims that the path to the study of urban religion has to be cleared in order to read through and across these fantasies of the city as it has emerged over the previous centuries.<sup>39</sup> Institutionalization includes the mapping of spatial and geographical contexts within which dominant powers and strong political decision makers calculated, made choices, and gave meanings to spatial distribution and economic exploitation of colonized and subjected peoples. Working class citizens in Western Pennsylvania, in jobs ranging from steel workers to coal miners, have long occupied the productive spaces along the riverside and had little interaction in the lives offered higher class citizens. Maps reflected this lived reality. Downtown Pittsburgh, where the banks of the Allegheny and Monongahela join the Ohio River, was delineated as the home of big

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<sup>37</sup> As Richard Callahan argues, “The two fields that study religion, class, and labor – American religious history and labor history – have typically been involved in separate conversations” in “Class and Labor” ed. Philip Goff *Blackwell Companion to Religion in America* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 7.

<sup>38</sup> Robert A. Orsi “Introduction” in *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 5.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.



steel. The riverbanks tightly held onto the majority of steel plants that were the daily destination for many Pittsburghers.

Early twentieth century maps reflect the importance of labor as an ordering agency in the spaces of the city. Concerned with the spatial distribution of things—factories, mines, and industrial complexes—these maps helped organize the city to accomplish certain specific tasks. In this case, organizing laborers in ethnic pockets. Putting industry along the river utilized local resources of water, sand, and coal to create the modern products that powered America forward.<sup>40</sup> The banks of the rivers had long been a source of resistance and conflict as various labor groups worked to organize, and capitalists gathered resources, to gain a foothold on some of the busiest nineteenth and twentieth waterways in the country. Since reconstruction, Pittsburgh was a center of America's growth.

The delicate balance that allowed for goods to be imported, produced, exported, sold, and bought, was fraught with challenges between bosses and workers. Highlighting the fragile borders created around labor strongholds were clashes between mill bosses and workers. Strikes at Homestead in 1892, the U.S. Steel Recognition Strike of 1901, the McKees Rocks strike of 1909, and the 1919 National Steel Strike, all signal this anxious environment.<sup>41</sup> If the preceding decades constituted the might and domination of industry then 1930s should have signaled the rise of labor as workers attempted to solidify rights they had fought for over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

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<sup>40</sup> McColleston, *The Point*, 49

<sup>41</sup> These events, while important in their own right, cannot be dwelled on fully here. The importance of symbolism resulting from these cataclysmic is what is focused on here. Each case became a rallying point for workers who dealt with a lack of access to unionizing efforts afforded other industries, especially after the Homestead Strike. For a longer conversation about these events see, Couvares, *Remaking of Pittsburgh*, McColleston, *The Point of Pittsburgh*, 107-193, and Samuel P. Hays., ed. *City at the Point: Essays on the Social History of Pittsburgh* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989).

Yet, despite those who had mastered the labor debates of earlier years, those who had tailored their demands to suit the needs the immigrant workers to clearly reflect the issues of Americanism, organized labor fell short during the depression. In a city dominated by big steel, where organized labor and the Democratic Party were unusually weak, the path to the promises of the future were narrower and less certain than in many other Eastern and Midwestern labor centers.<sup>42</sup> Religious institutions and actors helped bridge the gap between the failures of business and political institutions in accounting for the disenfranchised lives of working class citizens.

Vanka explored the close connections of labor sectors in his painting “Mother Raises Her Sons for Industry.” It is possible that this mural came, “from a disaster near Johnstown where seventy two men were trapped in an explosion. The body of this son was the first brought to the surface. The mother is sorrowing over him while at the same time sending his three brothers into the mine with a rescue expedition. It actually happened that she lost all four sons.”<sup>43</sup> It is possible that Vanka based this mural on stories he heard during his travels in Johnstown, a major steel and coal producer just east of Pittsburgh. In 1909, twelve men were killed in the Cambria Steel Company’s mines, perhaps the result of a dynamite explosion. As reported in another labor town, Toledo, Ohio, “All the dead are foreigners.”<sup>44</sup> While steel moved the city forward in some modern, progress driven society, Vanka cautioned against excess, giving the community imagery to help create a cohesive social and cultural identity. Fit within existing

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<sup>42</sup> Courvares, *Remaking*, 130.

<sup>43</sup> David Leopold, *The Gift of Sympathy: The Art of Maxo Vanka* (Bucks County, PA: The James A. Michener Museum, 2001), 30.

<sup>44</sup> “Explosion Kills 12: Disaster in Coal Mine at Johnstown,” *Toledo Blade*, November 4, 1909. <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=juoTAAAAIABAJ&sjid=ov8DAAAAIABAJ&pg=2154,2035740&dq=johnstown+mining+explosion&hl=en>, accessed February 12 2013.

communal ties and organizational structures, these images resonated a natural extension of formal and official visions of reality.

Linked to the mapping process of the city, organizers concerned themselves with water distribution, traffic flows, and engineering the best arrangements for manufacturing steel.<sup>45</sup> Recovering workers' experience against this overview invites a process of examination of the crossing and dwelling as, in St. Nicholas Parish's case, as Croatians made their way across the Atlantic and resettled in a new modern, industrial complex. Ethnic and religious concerns wrapped with class formation in redefining the complex marketplace of steel. Steel, as a commodity, determined market trends in cities, was a source of power in and of itself, enchanting the public sphere with a vitality of its own. As worker relationships were defined primarily against visions of secular steel, economics bled into all facets of life. Adamic best described this place during his travels, noting, "Pittsburgh – with its great, smoking, flaming steel mills and its ugliness which is so honest and intense it almost becomes beauty."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> As Ryden notes, "Modern maps are concerned only with the spatial distributions of things – physical or cultural phenomena – and with helping their users accomplish certain specific tasks, depending on the type of map: wayfinding, education, delineating property, and so on. The cartographic imagination of our era is concerned with, and responds to, the things that are in a particular location but must necessarily stop short of dealing with the meanings of that location and the objects that it contains" in *Mapping*, 36.

<sup>46</sup> Adamic, *My America*, 164.

Industry in a Smokey Ol' Town

Pittsburgh town is a smoky ol' town, Pittsburgh  
Pittsburgh town is a smoky ol' town, Pittsburgh  
Pittsburgh town is a smoky ol' town  
Solid iron from McKeesport down  
Pittsburgh, Lord God, Pittsburgh

-Woody Guthrie

Jacob A. Evanson compiled the folk songs of Pittsburgh's industrial culture in George Korson's *Pennsylvania Songs* in 1949. In contrast to coal miners, lumberjacks, farmers, and traditionally 'rural' labor groups, Evanson noted that, "steelworkers had access to all the commercial amusements of a big industrial city...meager wages however, kept steelworkers from patronizing them as often as they wished."<sup>47</sup> Instead, workers turned to bars, ethnic clubs, and church communities, restructuring social configurations from European pasts. While steel workers had little to no time to write down their stories and their narratives, their songs mediated their experiences of moving steel and goods up and down the rivers. As Evanson found, "Pittsburgh's great power is awe-inspiring, but the city is also friendly. It is smoky, dirty, noisy, and sweaty, as human beings give out their energies to turn iron ore into steel."<sup>48</sup>

Secular rather than religious images usually characterize industrial Pittsburgh. Popular images of the city and region have more to do with steel and sports teams than with churches.<sup>49</sup> Yet, far from being peripheral to Pittsburghers, religion defined values, structured institutions and organized environments both in regards to labor, and in

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<sup>47</sup> Jacob A. Evanson "Folksongs of an Industrial City"

<sup>48</sup> George G. Korson, *Pennsylvania Songs and Legends* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1949), 426.

<sup>49</sup> The labor history of Pittsburgh was done primarily in the 1980s, and much of the historiography distances itself from the study of religious lives of citizens.

societal negotiations.<sup>50</sup> Within the story of industry and Pittsburgh, religion goes unnoticed, at the very least unhinged from practices of class and labor. Recovering stories associated with and about these entangled networks actively questions the promises within the world of steel, illustrating the central place that industry must take in any exploration of Depression era America. The murals along with other folk traditions, such as songs, oral histories, and stories underscore a central feature of the history of the Pittsburgh region: the intimate tie between the growth of industry and the onset of mass immigration.<sup>51</sup> In the context of an exploitative economy that is characteristic of the Euro-American presence in the land, immigrants displayed a profound, self-constructed sense of place.<sup>52</sup> Their tales help fill gaps where primary and secondary sources fall short capturing the overwhelming ways the lives of immigrants and industry were intertwined. Moving between the national prominence of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger to the streets of Pittsburgh folk tales, this chapter explores the intimate relationship of the Pittsburgh region to the labor lore history of the country.

While folklorists have explored the labor lore of coal communities more fully, the activities of urban steel forgers in comparison have received scant study. Yet, as Richard Francavilla has noted, “Industry forms the backdrop for all human activities: machinery and buildings design to extract, process, and ship mineral wealth stand shoulder to

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<sup>50</sup>For example, June Granatir Alexander, whose examination of immigrant, specifically Slovak, religious responses to church hierarchy, concludes, “institutions such as national churches had worked to preserve their traditional language, culture, and religion.” In his study, religious institutions helped foster a connection to Europe, but also helped embed immigrants into the social structures in Pittsburgh. In, *The Immigrant Church and Community: Pittsburgh’s Slovak Catholics and Lutherans 1880-1915* (Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press; 1987), 132-142. Also, Linda K. Pritchard argues that, “the Church was one of the most pervasive forces in the life of immigrants,” “The Soul of the City: A Social History of Religion in Pittsburgh,” in *City at the Point: Essays on the Social History of Pittsburgh* ed. Samuel P. Hays (Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), 327-353.

<sup>51</sup> Nora Faires, 10.

<sup>52</sup> Ryden, *Invisible Landscapes*, xxi.

shoulder with small mining communities.”<sup>53</sup> While Francavilla focuses his study on coal communities, his care at looking at folk traditions of place and labor allows for a nuanced picture of American life and dreams of American ways of life across class and ethnic backgrounds. While steelworkers struggled in day to day living situations, the result of long work hours and small pay, folk tales and songs helped provide a sense of shared identity and struggle, and offered a form of resistance against cultural streams.<sup>54</sup> These songs, though not focused on religion, reveal the impact of class and labor on nearly every facet of daily life.

The Almanac Singers recorded several songs about the city and stopped in Pittsburgh in 1941. Members Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie composed several songs on the economic impacts of steel. Seeger immortalized impressions of the city in “Where the Old Allegheny and Monongahela Flow.” Guthrie, for his part, captured the turmoil surrounding Depression era politics and realities in his song “Pittsburgh” when he sang of the “Smokey old Town” where “All I do is cough and choke, From the iron filings and the sulphur smoke, In Pittsburgh, Lord God, Pittsburgh. From the Allegheny to the Ohio she’s all gonna melt up CIO, Pittsburgh! Lord God! Pittsburgh!” Armed with his encounters with steelworkers and an understanding of hard labor conditions, Guthrie embraced them in his work and documented their hardships. He rewrote “Hard Travelin’” during his stay in Pittsburgh so as to include steel workers, writing, “I’ve been working

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<sup>53</sup> Richard Francavilla, *Hard Places: Reading the Landscape of America's Historic Mining Districts* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997), 9.

<sup>54</sup> Investing this resistance involves Bruce Lincoln argument that, “To hold that thought is socially determined does not mean that all thought reflects, encodes, re-presents, or helps replicate the established structures of society, for society is far broader and more complex than its official structures and institutions alone... Change comes not when groups or individuals use ‘knowledge’ to challenge ideological mystification, but rather when they employ thought and discourse, including even such modes as myth and ritual, as effective instruments of struggle.” Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 7.

that Pittsburgh steel, I thought you knowed I've been a dumpin' that red-hot slag, way down the road I've been a blasting, I've been a firin', I've been a pourin' red-hot iron I've been hittin' some hard travelin', lord.”<sup>55</sup>

Hard travelin' highlights the disparate places working class citizens moved to find a livable wage. Guthrie, hailing from the dustbowl of Oklahoma, and himself and rambling man of sorts, was, like Vanka, attached and sympathetic to the disenfranchised. Placing Pittsburgh within the larger framework of labor in America registered the omnipresence of big steel, where the many indicators of labor, “hittin,” “stackin,” “cutting,” “firin,” “pourin,” and “travelin” marked the forever-incompleteness of work and modernity. While the pace of change changed, labor practices were becoming more mechanized, wrapping identities around machines that were designed to increase speed, but that decreased self-awareness of the self and work. Steel work by its very nature entailed the alienation of labor, and Guthrie continued the long tradition of laborers in putting this dusty and dangerous engagement to music.

An earlier song, “Where the old Allegheny and Monongahela Flow” was notated by Evanson in 1947, but dates to the early 1900s. The song, played for Evanson by J.J. Mannors in Pittsburgh, memorializes the industrial might of the city, “I live in that city that is built among the hills, Where smoke is always pouring from the big rolling mills, And steamboats on the rivers go towing to and fro, Where the old Allegheny and Monongahela flow.”<sup>56</sup>

Creating songs that told their stories, gave meanings to the laborers' world. For example, when he was a steelworker, Axel Simonen, “made up the words of Songs of

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<sup>55</sup>Mark Allan Jackson, “Prophet Singer: The Voice and Vision of Woody Guthrie” Dissertation 117.

<sup>56</sup>George G. Korson, *Pennsylvania Songs*, 440.

Steel” around 1930.”<sup>57</sup> He wrote about the greedy nature of the mill owners, while recalling earlier local strikes, “Makers of Steel, Producers of wealth, Have heard the music of steel. They sing the song of steel: “How wrong it is in this life, To add more to the riches of the greedy. In the mills there is a scheming; The greedy are grasping for power, Always they want more profits. When aroused, their slaves murmur, Like this: “Sure our living is wretched, That’s why we should have better working conditions. Workingmen, unite, organize! Therein lies the strength to win. Union aids the fight for freedom, And ushers in the joyful spring of life!”<sup>58</sup>

The most popular song and folk tale, at least for the Slavic community was that of Joe Magarac. Magarac’s lore is particular apt because he is supposedly a representation of the Slav community. Jacob A. Evanson wrote the tune based on the famous legend, but acknowledged he was unsure of the Magarac’s origin. In the contested spaces of Pittsburgh, the Irish, Hungarians, and Slovaks all had a claim on the narrative arguing that the “Paul Bunyan of the steel mills” best represented their ethnic community.<sup>59</sup> The song of Magarac, also recorded in Korson’s collection recounts his size and power in the mill, “I’ll tell you about a steel-man, Joe Magarac that’s the man! I’ll tell you about a steel man, Best steel maker in all the land. Steel-heart Magarac, that’s the man. He was sired in the mountain by red iron ore, Joe Magarac that’s the man! He was sired in the mountain by red iron ore, Raised in a furnace – soothed by its roar, Steel-heart Magarac, that’s the man!” The song of Joe Magarac alludes to the famous legend of the heroic working class narrative that played up ethnic backgrounds in the work place in battles for meaning of Americanism. Magarac was represented as both a hero and a villain

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<sup>57</sup> Simonen, Axel quoted in Korson, *Pennsylvania Songs*, 451.

<sup>58</sup> Simonen, Axel “Teraksen Soitto (Song of Steel)” in Korson, *Pennsylvania Songs*, 451.

<sup>59</sup> Jacob A. Evanson “Joe Magarac” in Korson, *Pennsylvania Songs*, 442.



depending on specific cultural contexts and who was suppose to be the audience in the context of contested ideas of space up and down the rivers of Pittsburgh.<sup>60</sup>

Joe Magarac literally gave his life for the steel industry. A tale published in 1931 by little known writer Owen Francis in *Scribner's Magazine* titled "The Saga of Joe Magarac: Steelman" encapsulates the multifaceted narrative of the steel working giant.<sup>61</sup> Standing over seven feet tall, Joe Magarac was supposedly made of steel. He was born in an iron ore mine and worked in a Western Pennsylvania mill. He had arms the size of smokestacks and he combed his hands through hot steel to make rails. Magarac competed in a strength contest in which the prize was the town's most beautiful woman Mary. After two competitors failed to lift the heaviest steel bar, Magarac showed up, lifted the dolly bar, and for good measure a few local townspeople. Not knowing the prize, Magarac refused to wed Mary, stating that he worked twenty-four hours a day, and had no time for distractions from his true love, the steel mill. He made his way back to his mill, where he began to work faster and harder until he made too many rails, forcing the mill to close because quotas had been far exceeded. In sadness over not being able to give his all for the company, Magarac melted himself down in the furnace, an act that created the world's finest steel.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Jennifer Gilley and Stephen Burnett argue that the Magarac tale illuminates the origins, uses, and abuses of Magarac in examining the invisible political power of the storyteller and the uses of stories. Further, while they engage in disputes of Magarac as fakelore or folklore, I instead focus this narrative form in the network of tellings and retellings that Gilley and Burnett engage while also leaving gaps for immigrant workers voices that were using this story, and the song of Joe Magarac within the lived reality of 1930s Pittsburgh in "Deconstructing and Reconstructing Pittsburgh's Man of Steel: Reading Joe Magarac against the Context of the 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Steel Industry" *The Journal of American Folklore* (Vol. 111. No. 442 Autumn, 1998), 392.

<sup>61</sup> Gilley and Burnett "Deconstructing" 393.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 394.

As Gilley and Burnett note, “In Croatian, Magarac means jackass.”<sup>63</sup> This point adds a humorous end to the tale, but also sheds light on the stories intended audience and creators. He may have been a symbol of strength and endurance for his steel craftsmanship, but he was indeed a “Magarac” for cheerfully sacrificing his life to the mill. The Magarac tale, contextualized within the contested relationship that existed between company owners and bosses and the workers themselves can be read as allegory pertaining to the steel industry as a whole. Indeed, many communities, and political entities, claimed the narrative as their own.

Situated in steel folk traditions, Magarac’s tale fits the contested spaces of the city because both company bosses and workers used this narrative for various reasons. Workers used him as the “jackass” and a way to express frustration, not aimed at their own individual inability to work under fiery, dangerous conditions for long hours, but, rather, at the corporations forcing them to do so. Set in the years surrounding some of the country’s most violent and far reaching labor disputes, this story operates as a symbol of the strength of the worker, but also as the limits as to how a worker should act in giving his life to the company. He, indeed, is a code for what coworkers were really thinking about the unthinking super worker who considered giving his life to the company an honor.<sup>64</sup> Magarac was the embodiment of the immigrant steel making process. But he also mocks the real hands whose exploitation was the source of owners wealth. As folklorists have noted, “Inasmuch, Magarac is rhetorically useful – especially instructive for discussions of gender, for instance. But he is also dangerous, and while he can

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

provide an interesting focus, it is important not to assume that he is alone in the larger story of the immigrant experience in the steel towns.

Folk songs and tales alongside Vanka's murals were not alone in expressing steel culture in their works. Thomas Bell wrote on the steel industry as a paradox of progress. In his fiction novel *Out of This Furnace*, published in 1941—the same year Vanka unveiled his second phase of murals—focuses on the economic and social significance he saw in the city. He describes the city as a dirty, gritty place, yet also as a place of opportunity. He questioned U.S. Steel's violence towards unionizing efforts in the early 1900s that resulted in human and earthly destruction:

No nation could permit such waste of its human material any more than it could permit the waste of its substance in the eroded hills and poisoned rivers and blasted earth of the steel country...All over America men had been permitted, as a matter of business, as a matter of dollars and cents, to destroy what neither money nor men could ever restore or replace. With this result: that America was no longer, except to a few of its people, a beautiful land, Where it wasn't blighted with slums its deforested hills were being washed into the sea, or the soil of its plains was being blown in clouds across the sky.<sup>65</sup>

Tying the fate of steel to that of the nation, Bell accomplished a goal similar to Vanka's. That is, to highlight the process by which steel became ingrained in society. The murals, along with other folk traditions, such as songs, oral histories, and stories, underscore a central feature of the history of the Pittsburgh region: the intimate tie between the growth of industry and the onset of mass immigration.<sup>66</sup> As both the writer and the artist explored different presents and futures seen in steel, the central place of religious of industry in Depression era America becomes more pronounced. The creation of a physical place,

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<sup>65</sup> Thomas Bell, *Out of This Furnace: A Novel of Immigrant Labor in America* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1941), 408, quoted in McColleston, *The Point of Pittsburgh*, 276.

<sup>66</sup> Faïres, "Immigrants," 10.

space, and meaning of steel within the urban city, therefore allows for an examination of worker-imagined futures crafted from industrial present and pulling on a foreign past.

Folklorists building on the idea of the importance of narratives have noted this dual presence of stories playing out on a very real landscape.<sup>67</sup> Kent Ryden argues that, the folk narrative is a vital and powerful means by which knowledge of the invisible landscape is communicated, expressed and maintained. In fact, the sense of place – the sense of dwelling in the invisible landscape – is in large part a creation of folklore and is expressed most eloquently through folklore.”<sup>68</sup> By looking into these “living elements of places,” it becomes possible to locate stories of steel in power places, and in doing so gauge and assess their meanings.<sup>69</sup> These forms of lore, written tales, stories, and essays of place succeed in giving sense to place and they nurture a collective identity around a location. They also show the motives from which people frame their lived environment.

Still, as Ryden notes, the experiential meanings ascribed to places are much fuller, more complex, and more vivid than those picked up secondhand. While maps can provide a certain detail about an environment, cognitive maps, those created from firsthand knowledge, act as an allusive shorthand notion for part of a life story.<sup>70</sup> Stories then, and folklore in general, are inseparably linked with landscapes. They are a central means by which people organize their physical surroundings. Often, making sense of these living conditions fell within the religious ethos of Pittsburgh’s immigrant communities.

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<sup>67</sup>As Kent Ryden notes, “...The feet we trace through the landscape need not be literal,” in *Mapping*, xi.

<sup>68</sup> Ryden, *Mapping*, 45.

<sup>69</sup> Ryden, *Mapping*, xii.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 55.

“Frequent Midnight Appearances of Wraith”

From the Allegheny to the Ohio, in Pittsburgh  
Allegheny to the Ohio  
Allegheny to the Ohio  
They're joining up in the C.I.O.  
Pittsburgh, Lord God, Pittsburgh

- Woody Guthrie

After a successful opening weekend, St. Nicholas was filled to capacity the Sunday after the murals were completed. In the following weeks crowds continued to pour in to see the murals. Catholics, Jews, Protestants, and, as Adamic noted, “people of no definite religion,” came to ask the proud Father Zagar to see his building.<sup>71</sup> Vanka remained grateful for all the support and admiration he received and was deeply moved by the gratitude he received from the community. Though contained by the walls inside the Croatian church located in a working class enclave, Vanka’s murals entered into a critical dialogue with Pittsburgh’s central cultural institutions.<sup>72</sup> His murals, in addition to showing sympathy for the disenfranchised of transnationalism and egregious working conditions, upheld the importance of religious institutions in Pittsburgh to act as charitable foundations that were, for many workers, absent in other facets of life. Further, as African-Americans left the South for Northern urban centers, Vanka too attended to these communities and in “The Capitalist” depicts the unjust life of a servant.<sup>73</sup> Yet, while he felt drawn to the immigrant communities along the river, he shortly left again, bound for New York, where he hoped to start an art school.

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<sup>71</sup> Adamic, *My America*, 171.

<sup>72</sup> For example, Vanka contrasted his work with two other famous Pittsburgh collections: the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall in Oakland, which champions the heroism of war, and John White Alexander's celebratory mural of the Pittsburgh steel industry, “The Crowning of Labor, 1906-07” that is the center piece to the central stairwell of the Carnegie Museum of Art. Barbara McCloskey “The Murals of Maxo Vanka” Background and Analysis” <http://www.vankamurals.org/mccloskey.html>, accessed April 1, 2013.

<sup>73</sup> McCloskey, “The Murals of Maxo Vanka.”

Always noted as being sympathetic to the concerns of nature, Vanka reported of being haunted by an “apparition” during the eighteen-hour workdays he spent painting his murals.<sup>74</sup> In depression era Pittsburgh, where ideas of American and Croatian identity were often competing and contested arenas, Vanka was nervous to tell his story. He had promised Father Zagar that he would not tell anyone until well after the murals were unveiled so that unwelcome attention would not come to the church. The haunting however, was too much for Vanka to bear.<sup>75</sup> In August of 1937, he told Adamic that something “Terribly strange” had happened in the church while he was there. He was being disturbed by a ghostly figure.

Adamic reported the story in *Harper's Ferry* in April 1938 and later in his travel memories *My America*. The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* retold the story. Even before the ghost tale received much press, however, the visitors flocked to the newly minted “mecca” as the *Daily Tribute* dubbed the church. An Ohio newspaper reported that over 24,000 post cards of the paintings were sold, and they had not been available when the murals immediately opened.<sup>76</sup> TIME magazine featured Vanka's murals in a full page spread with complete reproductions of each work, but made no mention of the potentially disturbing story.<sup>77</sup>

While he preferred to work alone, Vanka was often joined in the early hours of the morning for coffee with Father Zagar before resigning for sleep. “Now, too, before I

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<sup>74</sup> The language of sympathy attached to Vanka is nearly universal. In hagiographical accounts of the artist, Adamic, newspaper reports, and church goers highlight his connection St. Francis of Assisi who is known for his affinity to birds. Using this language it appears that attempts were made to downplay Vanka's haunting as something that could only happen, or be noticed, by someone like him. Yet, according to newspapers, and popular folktales, ghosts and other apparitions, while not commonplace, were an accepted narrative that, while not going unquestioned, did not warrant much doubt.

<sup>75</sup> Adamic, 172.

<sup>76</sup> John Selby, “Artist Vanka Paints Bums: Yugoslavian Also Does Church Murals in U.S.” *The Youngstown Vindicator* March 19, 1939.

<sup>77</sup> William Delahan, “Maxo Vanka and the Millvale Ghost” *The Pittsburgh Press* October 8, 1967

come to the story that I want to narrate to you, I should probably help you to imagine the atmosphere at the church at night,” Vanka recalled. He described the frantic pace of his work, his attempt to complete the work of a year in an eight-week span, and the immense creaking scaffolding and damp conditions of recent early spring rain, each detail layering the tale. After several days of this, Vanka noticed a stranger in the church. He told Adamic, “While mixing paint and feeling rather cold and tired, but not exhausted, I glanced at the altar beneath me, which was rather fully illuminated by my lamp’s downward flood of light...and there was a figure, a man in black, moving this way and that way in front of it, raising his arms and making gestures in the air.”<sup>78</sup>

“I felt weird, cold, and [was] trying to not think about him,” he continued. “A while later I heard him walking down the main aisle and mumbling rhythmically – the dogs were barking outside.”<sup>79</sup> He, of course, thought it was Father Zagar and instead of out of the normal, was mostly annoyed that the priest had interrupted his work. While he thought it odd Zagar had said nothing, he drifted back to work. He continued to work for several more days, only intermediately bothered by the priests strange entrances and sudden exits in the church, and thought little of the intrusion.

The following week, however, Vanka, working early into the morning, was overcome by a weird, cold feeling. He recalled being “vaguely vexed and feeling very unpleasant.”<sup>80</sup> Again, thinking Zagar was bothering him, Vanka stormed into the rectory next door to the church only to find the priest asleep on the couch. Zagar, startled awake, began to apologize to Vanka for not having coffee and food ready. Still angered by the

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<sup>78</sup> Adamic “My America,” 173.

<sup>79</sup> R.E.S. Thompson, “Scribe Disappointed (?) In Search For Ghost” Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, March 21, 1938.

<sup>80</sup> Adamic, *My America*, 175.

Priest's bizarre behavior and intrusions, Vanka asked if Zagar had been sleeping all night. When Zagar confirmed that he had dozed off early in the night, he began questioning Vanka if he was aware of the ghost story of the parish. Zagar went on to tell a story that he dated as fifteen years old, which places it close to the date when a large portion of the church burned down in 1924. Zagar confessed that, "Before I came, there were quarrels and arguments among the Croatians hereabouts pertaining to this ghost, or whatever it is. I am a skeptic as to ghosts and apparitions, and never believed the tradition, not really, but sometimes, listening to people speak of it..."<sup>81</sup> The ghost, always referred to as "he," was supposedly a former priest who stole money from the church. This priest was doomed to make penance through ritual and prayer each night at the church.

The most important part of the story according to Adamic was the next night. After a knock that Vanka remembered, "cut into me like a knife," the old man in black moved down the aisle altarward. Zagar, who was helping Vanka mix paints, could only watch as Vanka tried to run out of the church and away from the dead priest. Powerless against this ghost, the sanctuary light went out. Zagar finally believed in the specter. That there was something present in building, something that signaled an otherworldly body, something not quite befitting to the religious beliefs of a Catholic priest, but certainly possible according to a spiritual being such as Vanka.

Yet, he, the ghostly priest, always remained only a sight and only a feeling, both conceived inside the brick and mortar of the church and outside of it lurking along the rivers and alongside the contested spaces of progress and modernity. This "something" was untouchable, but always looming and present within the church building; it could be seen, but in Vanka's estimation was something unnamable. He could only hint at its

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.



ominous presence, stating it was, “Something: call it what you like. I know that I had a most terrific experience.”

This story, then, situated within the social context of Pittsburgh industry, reflects larger cultural worldviews that were part of a logically constructed belief system that was forced to reconsider itself when the boundary between self and world began to become undone.<sup>82</sup> While church members attempted to corral the ghost tale, popular narratives retold it repeatedly. While old stock Croatians were not shocked by the telling, new immigrants seemed to downplay the occurrence. Aside from the varied interest in seeing these paintings and creating a sense of pride and notoriety for the Croatian community, Vanka’s haunting speaks to his understanding and mapping of the specters of modernity surrounding the building and himself.

By unpacking the haunting of Vanka within the idea of the contested city spaces, it is possible to uncover several modes of understanding and expression that explain the excesses of modernity in Pittsburgh. Instead of seeing the specter of Vanka as strange occurrence, following Stewart it is possible to engage the haunting as a “mode of unforgetting.” That is, in it, “the past is never quite past but reverberates in the present, and ‘things’ are never quite set and contained but reverberate and echo in signs and excess significations.”<sup>83</sup> The ghost as a form of excess expresses itself within the

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<sup>82</sup> Explored by Folklorists, “Ghost beliefs reflected conceptions of the afterlife, cultural understandings about land use and home construction, concerns about morality and human responsibility, ideas about proper grieving and respect and treatment of the dead, and any manner of culturally based issues that endowed items of belief with meaning and power.” Here, tracing the haunting of Vanka in this same vein arguing against a true and false dichotomy gives value to this story within its specific cultural context. *Ghostly Matters*, 13. This particular boundary marker of the self argued in John Modern, “Rethinking secularism: Confused Parchments, infinite socialities,” *The Immanent Frame*.

<http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2013/03/04/confused-parchments-infinite-socialities/> (accessed April 20, 2013).

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, 75.

industrial complex of Pittsburgh as moment of pause and powerlessness in the contested arena of politics and economics.

The ghost then acts a power structure in which identity is no longer only tied to place and to work. The importance of the specter, or the something that followed Vanka in his work shows that identity depended on the local way of life within the spaces alongside the rivers, but that these identities were also impacted by events. Imaging this experience as not just a symbol of something else but as an act of negotiation and excess indicates that power is a “doubly occupied place” exceeded by its own history with resonations of nostalgia and dreams of occupied pasts, presents, and futures.<sup>84</sup> While not writing directly on a haunting practice, Stewart’s language of place is especially helpful in picturing how spaces are imagined and expressed in forms of cultural productions, and how ghostly traces becoming pressingly real.

Avery Gordon’s seminal work is also especially helpful in looking at the usefulness of ghost stories in contested living spaces. She argues that the paradoxical nature of haunting is rooted in the registering of a “degraded present.”<sup>85</sup> Haunting evidence, and the power of ghosts, is rooted in “the structure of feeling that is something akin to what it feels like to be the object of a social totality vexed by the phantoms of modernity’s violence.”<sup>86</sup> Cultural imaginings, affective experiences, animated objects, marginal voices, and powerful narrative traces help establish a mode of story telling, in this case, ghost tales, as a production of power.

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<sup>84</sup> Stewart argues on these “occupied places” are not only physical markers on the landscape, but also memorization practices. She writes that, “Culture becomes not a haven of ideas or a fixed state of experience but a social imaginary erupting out of a storied cultural real...culture is ruminative and filled with density and desire; it derails into magic and threat, trauma and melancholy, playful performance and deep eccentricity. It imagines itself not as finished code but as a series of encounters and sudden eruptions of signs and action out of a world got down” in *A Space*, 64.

<sup>85</sup> Gordon, *Ghostly*, 207.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

The mingling of fact, fiction, and desire shaped the lived experience of Vanka's specter. As Vanka worked to make sense of his "strange encounters" with death, he engaged in a process of legitimizing his story against the metanarrative of steel cultural production already in place when he arrived to do his work as a painter. The ghost made itself known within the world of Pittsburgh's industrial capital system, where workers expressed meanings through available processes.

Gordon argues for three important characteristics of a haunting, which are all present in this case. First, she argues that ghosts import a "charged strangeness" into the place or sphere that is being haunted, thus, effectively unsettling the propriety and property lines that delimit a zone of activity or knowledge. Second, she emphasizes that the ghost is primarily a symptom of what is missing.<sup>87</sup> In the case of Vanka's haunting, the priest had to repent for his sin of theft from the church. Third, and finally, Gordon suggests that the ghost is alive, that human beings are in relation to it, and it has designs on humans that must be reckoned with out of a "hospitable memory."<sup>88</sup>

The failure to fully explain the ghost of the former priest creates the frightening aspect of haunting, that is it possible to, "be grasped and hurtled into the maelstrom of the powerful and material forces that lay claim to you whether you claim them as yours or not."<sup>89</sup> The historical ghost coming out of the deep social memory created a world view, not just of physical spaces, but also of ghostly shadows. As the ghost stirred the space between Vanka and Father Zagar, it moved into a social place and into the shared memory of the community. The work of the specter aggravated the familiar confines of the parish as it made its haunted entry onto and into the landscape of the religious

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 63.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Gordon, *Ghostly*, 166.

community. Mrs. Parry, an opinion columnist for the *Post-Gazette* summarized the tale for the community quite succinctly writing, “It is natural to be proud of one’s local ghosts, I dare say... There seems to be something in that church but what it is I don’t know. But if there was ‘something’ to see and experience, Maxo Vanka, if anyone, would see and experience it.”<sup>90</sup> It was from the shadowy places created from the steel industry that Vanka’s paintings emerged as a critique of society and as a form of religious expression within the Croatian community, and it was from these very same shadowy places that the ghost emerged and challenged the power structures that Vanka brought forth in his own accounts.

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<sup>90</sup> Florence Fisher Perry, “I Dare Say—Gleaned Here and There” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, April 28, 1938. The remarks by Mrs. Parry in her opinion column underscore the possibility for ghost narratives to exist and flourish in Pittsburgh. Working class immigrants often grappled with Americanisms and as such downplayed events that were considered outside normal societal remarks.

War Machines and Work Machines

All I do is cough and choke in Pittsburgh  
All I do is cough and choke in Pittsburgh  
All I do is cough and choke  
From the iron filings and the sulphur smoke  
In Pittsburgh, Lord God, Pittsburgh

- Woody Guthrie

When Vanka returned to Pittsburgh in 1941 at Father Zagar's request to paint several more murals and cover the remainder of the walls, he did so on one condition: that he would not be forced to paint between the hours of midnight and four in the morning. The ghost of 1937 remained for Vanka. His second set of paintings, however, reflected several important changes in world economic and political affairs. While he still focused on several Croatian and Pittsburgh religious and community interests, again providing an antithesis to juxtapose the lived reality with an imagined past or future, this time he was ultimately concerned with European war.<sup>91</sup>

In the four years between his Pittsburgh visits, Vanka reported no more hauntings. He had, however, moved from urban environment of New York City to a small farm in Eastern Pennsylvania. Pittsburgh, in this time, was transformed into a union stronghold. The mid to late 1930s marked a period of CIO dominance as millions of workers across the United States organized their workplaces.<sup>92</sup> 1936 and 1937 were watershed years for Pittsburgh labor supporters as Labor Democrats swept mill town municipal elections.<sup>93</sup> While President Roosevelt's victory in office gave labor rights activists great hope,

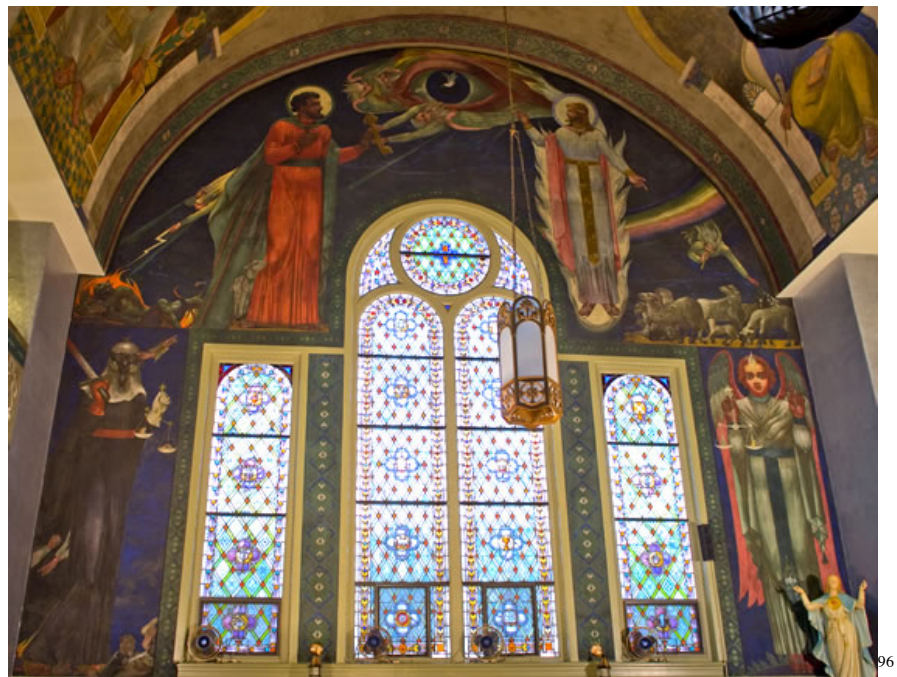
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<sup>91</sup> McCollister, *The Point*, 298.

<sup>92</sup> Hinshaw, John H., *Steel and Steelworkers: Race and Class Struggle in Twentieth-Century Pittsburgh* (State University Press of New York; Albany: 2002), 65-105.

<sup>93</sup> McCollister, *The Point*, 280.

violence was still a major part of organizing efforts. At Jones & Laughlin Steel in Aliquippa and Charles Schwab's plants in Bethlehem for example, AFL, SWOC, and Communist party members all attempted to organize workers by recalling the victims of the 1892 Homestead Strike.<sup>94</sup> In 1936, the first issue of *Steel Labor; The Voice of the Steel Workers Organizing Committee*, printed a "Declaration of Independence" which summarized these events as an effort against the "Despotism of the Lords of Steel."<sup>95</sup> For many steel workers throughout western Pennsylvania, however, labor issues remained an important religious concern. Vanka expressed this worry in eleven new murals. With creative power, labor became linked to spiritual issues. Yet, this process was not divorced from a lived dimension.



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<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 284.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 283.

<sup>96</sup> Rosensteel, Rene, photographer. "Left Wall of Church" Photograph. From "The Murals of Maxo Vanka" [http://www.vankamurals.org/images/Rosensteel\\_20080311\\_IMG\\_1521.jpg](http://www.vankamurals.org/images/Rosensteel_20080311_IMG_1521.jpg) (Accessed April 10, 2013).

In his 1941 images, Vanka expressed his unhappiness with the militarization of Europe and feared for his family still living in Croatia. Remembering World War I, Vanka painted two murals under the choir stand. The murals on the left wall, injustice and justice, contrast one another in several ways, but the most important is the dark, foreboding injustice figure. Its face is covered by a WWI style gasmask; the scale in its left hand is unbalanced, with money given more weight than peace. Further, the figure is holding a sword in its right hand, which is covered in blood portrayed by the red glove and red waistband. The figure, which stands over eight feet tall, is completed by the fires of hell which surround the head, just below the figure of St. Mark. The two “Battlefield” images highlight his strong anti-war stance. Like his 1937 work, these images again gave religious expression to what Vanka saw as problems in the world.



#### **BATTLEFIELD**

The climactic anti-war paintings, on the ceiling under the choir, show Christ and the Holy Mother interposing themselves between soldiers on a battlefield.

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<sup>97</sup> Rosensteel, Rene, photographer. “Battlefield” Photograph. From “The Murals of Maxo Vanka”[http://www.vankamurals.org/images/Rosensteel\\_20080408\\_IMG\\_5240.jpg](http://www.vankamurals.org/images/Rosensteel_20080408_IMG_5240.jpg) (Accessed April 10, 2013).



#### BATTLEFIELD

The climactic anti-war paintings, on the ceiling under the choir, show Christ and the Holy Mother interposing themselves between soldiers on a battlefield.

98

Unlike the other murals, the two “Battlefield” images complement each other more than the rest, tend to render two different paths. With the rise of Fascism in Europe, Vanka was more concerned than ever for the family he had left behind in Croatia. In one image a German and British soldier each stab the crucified Christ figure, suggesting that both sides share guilt in war. The second image relies on Vanka’s use of mothers as central figures within the religious community. Here, the Holy Mother attempts to stop soldiers from killing on another, but the pained expression on her face leaves the fate of the infantrymen unknown.

Max Vanko’s murals of industry, and his haunting, evoke an unsettling presence looming within himself but also generated by industry. While Vanka himself was too in the process of becoming American, industrial might at the forks of the Ohio River figured largely in many immigrant communities. Located on the frontier of the future and modernity, Vanka reflected upon and expressed the tangible buzz surrounding modernity,

<sup>98</sup> Rosensteel, Rene, photographer. “Battlefield” Photograph. From “The Murals of Maxo Vanka”[http://www.vankamurals.org/images/Rosensteel\\_20080408\\_IMG\\_5219.jpg](http://www.vankamurals.org/images/Rosensteel_20080408_IMG_5219.jpg) (Accessed April 11, 2013).



of the Depression economics and politics of the 1930s and pre-World War II hysteria.

Vanka and the church at St. Nicholas were haunted, of that much it is certain.<sup>99</sup>



**THE CAPITALIST**

An American capitalist reads a stock report dated 1941, while he is served a sumptuous dinner by a black servant. In the background an angel weeps while a skeleton hand offers hell fire.

100

The fires of hell loom large for the capitalist. Andrew Mellon is presumed to be the stand in for all capitalists though Vanka never revealed his inspiration for his model. One of Vanka's last painted images, "The Capitalist" portrays a man who feasts on a large meal brought to him by an African American servant, while he reads his stocks and an angel shields its eyes from the entire situation. Like the rest of church, across the pew is another path that labor for the Croatian community could go. Vanka modeled the head of family after the mayor the Millvale community where St. Nicholas was located, and the young girl in the picture is his own daughter Peggy. While the capitalist ate alone with his stocks, the Croatian family eats a plain meal under the watchful eye of a Christ figure. As two of the last images Vanka painted, Vanka continued to make use of the

<sup>99</sup> Following Avery Gordon's conceptualizing of ghost stories, "Its not that the ghosts don't exist." In *Ghostly Matters*, 9.

<sup>100</sup> Rosensteel, Rene, photographer. "The Capitalist" Photograph. From "The Murals of Maxo Vanka" [http://www.vankamurals.org/images/Rosensteel\\_20080318\\_IMG\\_3394.jpg](http://www.vankamurals.org/images/Rosensteel_20080318_IMG_3394.jpg) (Accessed April 11, 2013).

spaces of the church as a way of religious expressing his concerns for the community while highlighting the importance of community for the working class.



**Croatian Family**  
Opposite "The Capitalist" Vanka portrays a Croatian working family having a simple meal of bread and soup in the presence of Christ. The industrial Allegheny Valley is in the background.

101

Taken as a whole, Vanka's murals provide just one case in the long line of labor histories of the Pittsburgh region where countless stories of individuals and working class communities are shaped by physical, dirty labor. While these histories are rarely concerned with American religious history, they still make up a significant part of the whole American experience.<sup>102</sup>

The story of Vanka is important because it uncovers the forms, function, and location of religion in an industrial complex. Religious expression and experience transform religious idioms and practices in meaningful ways no less than any other facet of human life. Under the dynamic process of steel production, industrial faith aided and

<sup>101</sup> Rosensteel, Rene, photographer. "Croatian Family" Photograph. From "The Murals of Maxo Vanka" [http://www.vankamurals.org/images/Rosensteel\\_20080326\\_IMG\\_4217.jpg](http://www.vankamurals.org/images/Rosensteel_20080326_IMG_4217.jpg) (Accessed April 11, 2013).

<sup>102</sup> Callahan, *Subject to Dust*, 198.

embedded immigrant communities in transnational ways, orienting them in new and fascinating ways. The murals at St. Nicholas Church are but one example in the rich negotiation process in American history. Due to the uncertain relationship between the overlaid relationship surrounding Vanka, haunting, folklore, and steal, each space contributes of the memorialization of steel. Through religiously expressing the concerns of the community through his murals, Vanka was able to negotiate the relationship of power and meaning within a the Steel City offering a pausing process and opening spaces for critiquing America in material terms.

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